CHRISTMAS EVE

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Every year when I sit down to write a sermon for Christmas Eve, I remember something the great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said about Christmas sermons. He didn't like them. In fact, on Christmas Eve he intentionally looked for a church where the service does not include a sermon. The reason, Niebuhr explained, is that the preacher is not up to the task. The topic is too big. Better to leave it to the poets and musicians, who have a way of expressing and celebrating truth without becoming so tedious—or boring.

My closest advisor tells me every year when she senses that I'm starting to fret about it, "Stop worrying. They're not coming to hear you. They want to hear the story, light a candle, sing Silent Night and go home."

And every year I consider not preparing and preaching a sermon and every year decide I can't do that either. I'm much too Presbyterian to worship without the preaching of the word, and besides, there are all those folk out there, some maybe for the first time, or maybe the only time ever—the ones my friend Barrie Shepherd, at the First Presbyterian Church of New York City tells every Christmas Eve—"By the way, we do this every Sunday at 11:00."

But I do understand how music tells the story with more depth and power and clarity than words alone ever could. And I do get out a few favorite poems, Dickens' *Christmas Carol,* Truman Capote's, *A Christmas Memory, Why the Chimes Rang*—my favorite from childhood—and W. H. Auden's *For the Time Being, A Christmas Oratorio.*

At the end of the long drama, Auden concludes:

> "Well, so that is that. Now we must
> dismantle the tree,
> Putting the decorations back into their
> cardboard boxes.
> The holly and mistletoe must be taken down
> and burnt,
> . . . .There are enough
> Leftovers to do, warmed up, for the rest of the week.
> Not that we have much appetite, having
> drunk such a lot,
> Stayed up so late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—
> To love all our relatives, and in general
> Grossly overestimated our powers."

We do place a lot of demands on ourselves at Christmas time, don't we? Cookies to bake, special goodies which simply must be reproduced in the very same way year after year, and cards to address from a list that grows every year and never gets any smaller, gifts to purchase, wrap, deliver, parties to attend, dinners to prepare, trees to purchase and decorate, and journeys to take, to be with loved ones.

I'm sure most of you heard or read—or received by e-mail, this year's favorite story about those first Christmas journeyers—the Three Wise Men. The assumption is that the wise men botched the job—because they were three wise men and not women. Had the Magi been women, they would have:

asked for directions
arrived on time
cleaned the stable
helped deliver the baby
brought a casserole
given practical gifts

We subject ourselves to high expectations and an enormous amount of stress to get to this evening in one piece and sometimes something gets lost in the process: something of the simplicity and goodness and unmistakable clarity of the event we celebrate tonight.

When we were very young parents we decided that in our home we would remember what the event was really about. We would focus on the story of Jesus' birth and not the cultural icon which Santa Claus has become. No "You better be good, you better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout," in our house. No reward punishment dynamic, no pagan mythology. The real story would be quite enough.

We also decided that there would be no toy guns in our house.

We lost both battles—quickly and decisively. In the absence of real toy guns, they (and even though it was not politically correct, I have to say it was the boys) simply turned other objects into weapons of mass destruction. Hair brushes became pistols; rulers became rifles, spatulas and wooden spoons became machine guns. It was a running shoot out in the living room between a 6 and 4 year old armed with a spatula and wooden spoon that did it. I surrendered. I made them turn in their weapons, took them to the basement, and with a jig saw someone had given me, made them very simple, but proper rifles, so that the battle could resume. Just a week ago, I was sitting with my three year old grandson and we were eating reindeer cookies with wonderful white icing and red noses—an annual gift from Ruthie, the Director of the Day School. So we were enjoying our reindeer cookies when he took a bite, examined the cookie carefully, wrapped his little fingers around the legs, pointed the antlers and said, "Bang, Bang,"—a reindeer cookie pistol. It's no wonder we lost!

We had no more luck with a Santa free Christmas. We really weren't committed to it anyhow, and it didn't take long for our children to teach us that there is a lot to be said for wonder and myth and imagination, that the line between what is real and what is unreal

truth, particularly if it is good and important truth. Finally, their immersion in the notion, in spite of our ignoring it, taught us to reexamine and rediscover the original idea of a saint who brings gifts for no other reason than he likes to give gifts. Our children taught us that there is some serious theology there.

And so I was delighted this year to discover something G.K. Chesterton wrote about Santa Claus. It's in a collection, *Spiritual Literacy—Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life* (Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, p. 267, see *Daybook,* Fall 1999)

> "What has happened to me has been the very reverse of what appears to be the experiences of most of my friends. Instead of dwindling to a point, Santa Claus has grown larger and larger in my life. It happened in this way. As a child I was faced with a phenomenon requiring explanation. I hung up at the end of my bed an empty stocking, which in the morning became a full stocking. I had done nothing to produce those things that filled it. I had not worked for them, or made them or helped to make them. And the explanation was that a certain being people called Santa Claus was favorably disposed toward me. What we believed was that a certain benevolent agency did give us those toys for nothing. And, as I say, I believe it still. I have merely extended the idea. Then I only wondered who put the toys in the stocking. Now I wonder who put the stocking by the bed, and the bed in the room and the room in the house, and the house on this planet, and the great planet in the void."

Chesterton went on to say that once he was grateful for a few dolls and crackers, but later he was grateful for stars and street faces and wine and the great sea. Once he was grateful for a gift too big to fit into a stocking. Later, he was grateful for "a present so big it takes two stockings to hold it, and then leaves a great deal outside: it is the large and preposterous present of myself."

Christmas is about gifts we do not earn or work for or deserve. Christmas is about the amazing grace of God—to give us this gift of ourselves, our lives, the time of our lives we have already been privileged to live and the time we have left to live, whatever that is. Christmas is about a God who wants us to know that we are loved, that our lives are intended, that apart from anything we have done or not done, the creator wishes us well. Christmas is about a God who came among us in the birth of an infant in Bethlehem to let us know how profoundly we are loved.

And Christmas is about a God who wants all of us to be changed by that love, changed into grateful children who suddenly find that they must love, must live in the love of God, by loving and caring for one another.

Dan Doty, who works for a church in Rock Island, wrote an article recently about driving an 11 year old boy to a penitentiary in a neighboring state, to see his older sister, convicted of a violent crime, not eligible for parole until she is 58. Charles lives with his grandmother—his mother lives in the same city and only agrees to see him occasionally.

All the way home in the car, Charles was sullen, didn't say a word. At the outskirts of the city, he suddenly asked Dan, "Would you take me to my Mom's house?"

Mostly when he calls and asks to see her she has some excuse for not taking him for the weekend. The visit with his sister had obviously stirred up longing for his mother. "If you'll just take me, she'll have to see me," he explained.

Dan reflects:

"The lad's hostile demeanor, the quiet, lonely suffering that had been so apparent throughout our trip—was the aftermath of repeated rejection by one of the central figures in his life. For Christmas, the eleven year old with me that day didn't want money or the latest fad in clothing or the newest high-tech game. He longed for his mom."

Dan concludes:

"The best Christmas gift you can give your child—or anyone else for that matter, I might add—your spouse, your dearly beloved, your parent, your brother or sister, your friends, the best gift of all is the gift of yourself.

May God's love for you, given in the birth of the baby in Bethlehem, stir up in you the capacity—the willingness—the need—to love as you have been loved.

It is the best gift of all.

And so, W.H. Auden has the shepherds say:

> "Let us run to learn
> How to love and to run
> Let us run to love.
> All, All, All,
> Run to Bethlehem.

Amen